

Advocates for Agriculture: Discovering Your Influential Power

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One doesn't have to watch any type of media source for very long these days to come across a story that is very negative towards agriculture. Specifically, animal agriculture has become a favorite target for many reporters, animal rights groups, and even some consumers. It seems that many of them chose not to even include the thoughts of actual farmers and ranchers when talking about agriculture. Instead they turn to the internet or other non-ag sources for their information. So with so much negative attention being placed on food production, what do we do as producers to combat this situation? While there is no silver bullet that will magically fix this problem, there are many things that producers can be doing to promote agriculture as a whole.

One of the first things that we need to realize is that farmers and ranchers are considered very trustworthy people. On top of that, many producers would also fall into the category of "influential people". Identifying and utilizing influential people has been studied since the 1940's. So who is an influential person? By definition, they are the most active 10% of our population, both socially and politically. Research has shown that one American in ten tells the other nine what to buy, where to eat and how to vote. The biggest commonality among this group is the fact that over 75% of them attend three or more meetings per year, as opposed to only 15% of the general population. Why does that matter? It's because information is power. When you attend a meeting, you gain knowledge that those who do not attend do not have.

Even though many producers might not think of themselves as being influential people, in reality they are. It's vital that they use their respect and influence in order to promote production agriculture.

Many of today's consumers are several generations removed from the land and have never met a farmer or rancher. This disconnect is one of the biggest reasons we are seeing the proliferation of misconceptions about agriculture. In order change this situation, producers need to go out and start talking to consumers. We realize that it's not as easy for some to start up a conversation with a total stranger as it may be for others. That is why we have developed the 3 T's, Talk, Teach, and Touch. Think of it as a road map for telling your story.

The first T is talk. While this may seem like a simple concept, many people aren't comfortable starting a conversation with a stranger. So to help with this, everyone should develop a 30 second elevator speech. The 30 second elevator speech is simply your introduction that tells people who you are, where you are from and what your connection to agriculture is. This great starter lays the groundwork for the conversation to begin. We can't

expect every consumer to seek us out and ask us questions. If we want these exchanges to occur, we must initiate them.

After the conversation has started, producers then need to start teaching about agriculture. The teaching aspect can also make some producers apprehensive. They may be afraid that they will get asked a question that they can't answer or that they may be challenged on an issue. But the fact is that this is where they should be the most comfortable. This is their opportunity to tell their own personal story about their involvement in agriculture. No one knows your story better than you do. Every producer has an exciting and unique story to tell. Consumers are not only hungry for the food we produce but the story that goes along with it.

Another thing to remember is to keep your story simple. The terminology that we use every day and makes complete sense to those of us in agriculture can be very confusing and misleading to consumers. This can actually be harder than it sounds. We tend to assume that everyone knows at least some of the most simple things about agriculture and food production. In reality though, that isn't necessarily true. So it's important that everyone keep that in mind.

The final T to remember is Touch. When you are telling your story, do it with honesty and passion. If you do those two things, you will really make a connection with the people you visit with and that is what we need to do. If you are excited about what you do, our consumers will be too. If you are able to connect with the person you are visiting, your story won't end with just that person. They will help tell your story as well by sharing it with their friends and neighbors.

By using the 3 T's, the job of telling your story to our consumers will be much easier. This is one of the best things we can do to promote production agriculture. There are hundreds of millions of dollars being spent to attack food production in this country. It would be impossible to match the kind of funds that these anti-agriculture groups have. However, we have something that their money can't buy and that is the people in agriculture. That is our best asset and we need to use it to our advantage.

Being an advocate for agriculture needs to be on your chore list. It's something you need to do every day. Look for the opportunities all of us have every day to promote agriculture and take advantage of them.